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Missiles 'Freeze' Is Brezhnev's April Fool Joke

To be fitting, Leonid Brezhnev should have waited until today to announce his missile "freeze." It would have been a grim April Fool joke.

Top-secret documents make it clear that the Soviet boss is playing a deadly shell game with his nuclear missiles. And it could well be a game of winner-take-all.

Brezhnev's offer to halt deployment of his SS20 medium-range rockets in the western Soviet Union was an empty gesture. Not only would it lock NATO into a dangerous disadvantage (if the West agreed not to deploy 572 additional nuclear systems starting next year), but the Soviets were giving away nothing. Brezhnev was offering to stop at the 300-missile level—but that's the number the Soviets had always planned to stop at.

With 300 missiles to secure his European flank, Brezhnev could easily afford not to deploy future SS20 missiles west of the Urals. In fact, intelligence sources told my associate Dale Van Atta there's a harrowing possibility that the purported "pullback" of SS20s would give the Kremlin many

more missiles capable of reaching the United States.

Here's why:

By attaching a third-stage rocket, the Russians' two-stage, intermediate-range SS20 becomes a full-fledged SS16 intercontinental ballistic missile that can hit targets in North America. And adding the 10-foot third-stage component to an SS20 is a relatively simple process.

The Soviets' SS16 ICBM is a fearsome weapon that has been developed and tested in extraordinary secrecy since at least 1973. According to top-secret CIA reports, the Russians went to elaborate lengths to keep the SS16's performance from being monitored by Western intelligence agencies. The precautions included "the use of canvas and camouflage netting at test ranges, test-firing only at night, and building roofs over rail sidings at a production plant"—all designed to thwart U.S. spy satellites.

Despite these measures, the CIA was able to gather information on the super-secret SS16. The agency counted a total of 32 test firings, and detected five failures. The final launches were made by soldiers during troop exercises, which indicated that the ICBM was about ready for deployment.

Toward the end of their series of SS16 tests, the Soviets began regular tests of its precocious "kid brother," the SS20. The CIA discovered a scary thing: both missiles use the same

basic elements and the same mobile truck launchers. As a result, the CIA report said, "it may not be possible to determine which missile a support base contains." The only way to tell for sure is to check the missile's performance after launching.

The SS20 is a super-smart missile. It has, according to the CIA, "an accuracy of about .02 nautical miles if a pre-surveyed launch position is used." That's less than half the length of a football field.

Not only that, but the SS20 is fully mobile; it's fired from the same truck that carries it around. It "can be launched within 30 seconds if it is at its highest state of readiness," the CIA reported, adding: "Otherwise, about 20 to 30 minutes are required..." And a new missile can be launched within a few seconds if major re-aiming isn't needed.

That's the SS20, the missile arrayed against our Western European allies. Brezhnev has offered not to deploy more than the 300 already in place—if no new U.S. missiles are sent to Europe.

What many Europeans fail to understand, though, is that each SS20 can be converted into a long-range missile. Realizing this, U.S. negotiators at the SALT II talks got the Russians to agree not to produce the third-stage "conversion kit" for its SS20s. That concession, of course, is now inoperative.